



RATINGS **PERFORMANCES** 9 **DIRECTION** 8
SCRIPT 8 **PRODUCTION** 8 **ENTERTAINMENT VALUE** 7

● IT was a scandalous legend in its own death-time. The Craig-Bentley murder case of 1952 resulted in a judgement which showed just how sightless was the blindfolded figure of British Justice.

Two teenage boys were interrupted on a Croydon warehouse roof, while attempting a break-in. Christopher Craig had a gun which he turned on the police. His partner, Derek Bentley, is said to have shouted "Let him have it, Chris".

One policeman was shot dead, another wounded. For that Craig was sentenced to jail, because he was under-age at sixteen. But Bentley – whose shout meant "give him the gun, Chris" and who had no firearm of his own – was hanged because he was of age at nineteen.

This, despite the jury's recommendation to mercy, the fact that Bentley was epileptic and illiterate with the mental age of a child – and it caused an outcry whose echoes still hang in the air over the case for that prosecution.

British injustice had been seen to be done. "It was," says co-producer Robert Warr, "a classic appeal against capital punishment. And, on an emotional level, it is the story of the destruction of innocence."

More matter-of-factly, co-producer Luc Roeg says, "It's just a bloody good story," adding, "I think even though it's set in the Fifties, and is a period film, it is still poignant today."

Even more directly, Peter Medak, whose fascination with working-class life gone sour was evident in *The Krays*, says, "I wanted to break the audience's heart."

The heart-breaking focus of that story is, inevitably, Bentley, part of a family always

trying to protect him from his own inadequacies, partially-caused, it's suggested, by a wartime bomb which buried him in rubble.

The post-war children of an uprooted society he and Craig gravitated towards each other, Bentley always influenced by the manic, smaller Craig who had collected 40 guns by the age of the shooting. Both aped American film gangster mannerisms.

If Bentley was destined for a life of crime it was because life itself was a crime against him.

For this was a Fifties that still knew deprivation. While the country celebrated the Festival of Britain, food rationing was still in force. Bentley was one of a gang of young punks whose diet was milk-shakes in between petty crimes.

Although intended as much as the portrait of an age as of a crime, it is obvious that Derek Bentley was a fate-abused misfit in a world which thought if you were retarded you had no feelings. Slow, and impeded by his lack of faculties, Bentley would have been more at home as the simple-minded soul of some faraway rural village, not lost in urban scrubland.

Says Warr, "You can see the very point on Derek's journey to the gallows and where it should and could have been stopped." Chris Eccleston who plays Bentley says, "I hope it will clear Derek's name."

Bentley himself wrote – through a warder, "The truth of this story has got to come out some day."

Then he signed it, painfully, the only word he could write: his Christian name. A left-handed boy in a right-handed world.

TOM HUTCHINSON reviews a gripping movie about the Craig- Bentley murder case of 1952 and its dramatic consequences

VERDICT

● Because the film isn't sensational, the result is often sensationally gripping. Medak is a director who's very good at picking up the nuances of an age and this surpasses *The Krays* in its appreciation of atmosphere that was thick with cigarette smoke and movie-mannerisms.

Early falterings: some off-putting angles and the story strays. But there are some magnificent family portrayals, notably Tom Courtenay as a cardiganed father trying to do his best with the worst.

But, while Paul Reynolds is vividly energetic as Craig, it is Chris Eccleston's movie as Bentley: raw-boned, raw-dealt. The performance of his young lifetime.

Let us hope – knowing the parlous state of British films – it is not to be his only one.

Producers
 LUC ROEG/ROBERT WARR
Director
 PETER MEDAK
Screenplay
 NEAL PURVIS/ROBERT WADE
Photography
 OLIVER STAPLETON
Music
 MICHAEL KAMEN
 116 Minutes Certificate 15
 (FIRST INDEPENDENT)

Derek Bentley CHRIS ECCLESTON
 Chris Craig PAUL REYNOLDS
 William Bentley TOM COURTENAY
 Fairfax TOM BELL
 Lillian Bentley EILEEN ATKINS
 Iris Bentley CLARE HOLMAN
 Niven Craig MARK MCGANN
 Lord Goddard MICHAEL GOUGH



LET HIM HAVE IT

ALAN FRANK gives his verdict on a fantasy comedy starring RIK MAYALL



● ON the evidence of his television work and few big screen appearances Rik Mayall may well be the finest living exponent of the art of course acting: his performances usually have all the subtlety of an elephant in a telephone booth while his screen persona is, to put it at its kindest, more abrasive and irritating than endearing. So the makers of *Drop Dead Fred!*, particularly screenwriters Carlos Davis and Anthony Fingleton, deserve high marks for creating a role which suits Mayall's all-stops-out, yah-boo-sucks naughty boy comic talents to a "T".

He's perfectly cast as all-too-real Drop Dead Fred, the imaginary childhood friend of Phoebe Cates who, after walking out on her adulterous husband (Tim Matheson) and returning to life with her domineering mother (Marsha Mason) reappears and proceeds to wreak merry hell in her life once again; havoc that is all the worse for the fact that only Cates (and, of course, the audience) can see him as he lays waste to her best efforts to get on with her life.

The idea for the film was provided by Fingleton's daughter Samantha. Says Fingleton: "When Samantha was growing up she had an imaginary friend named 'Sarah' who became an important member of our household. Whenever water or milk was spilled on the carpet, Sam would blame Sarah".

The idea has been splendidly translated into a smart screenplay which lets the plot - which has Cates trying to get Matheson back (although as written and played, he is a smarmy and not particularly pleasant character whom Cates would be far happier losing) while she attempts, none too successfully, to deal with Mayall's rampages - look after itself in favour of a series of hilarious, often surreal, comic set pieces.

The film's Dutch director Ate de Jong was, he says, attracted to the movie because of its mixture of fantasy and reality. "Film is the best

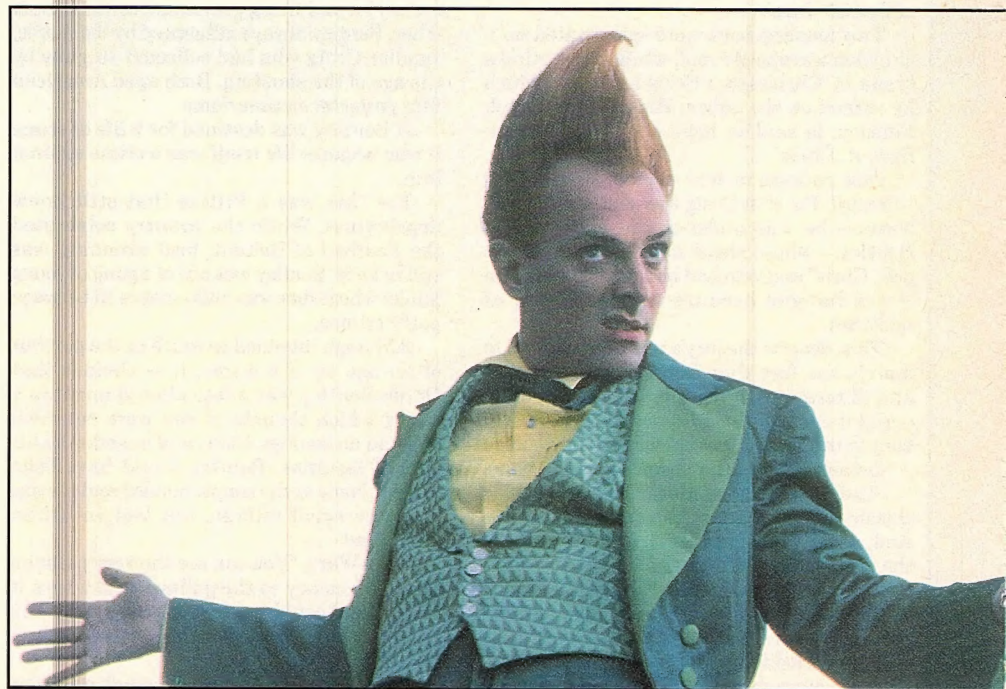


possible medium to explore fantasy and *Drop Dead Fred!* has an excellent combination of both reality and fantasy", he states. "*Drop Dead Fred!* also appealed to me because it isn't just comedy for comedy's sake, the fantasy in the film has an underlying emotional message."

I'd certainly agree with his view on comedy but I'm far from certain about the strength, if any of the "underlying emotional message". If there is one, it seems to me the obvious one about the need to retain some elements of one's childhood dreams in adulthood which is hardly deep.

The comedy is pretty constant throughout and the highlights, notably a posh restaurant lunch which is turned into a slapstick shambles by Mayall and the sinking of Cates' best friend Carrie Fisher's houseboat, are alone worth the price of admission.

Mayall - who deservedly has top billing - dominates the screwball proceedings with a marvellous wild performance in a tailor-made role. De Jong and the writers have cleverly harnessed his undoubted talent for creating a basically dislikable character and making that character hugely funny.



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SCRIPT 7	PRODUCTION 7	ENTERTAINMENT VALUE 8

VERDICT

● Mayall, seizing every opportunity offered him (and there are plenty) creates a truly memorable crazy character who dominates the proceedings even when, in an hilariously surreal scene in a doctor's waiting room, he's confronted with a slew of suddenly visible imaginary friends.

He is excellently served by an inventive

screenplay, sparse but effective special effects and sly, sustained direction which gives his "normal" co-stars well-taken opportunities to make their respective marks against near-overwhelming opposition.

A neat idea in the tradition of *Harvey* has been smoothly brought to the screen in a hugely enjoyable manner.



drop dead fred!

Producer
PAUL WEBSTER
Director
ATE DE JONG
Screenplay
CARLOS DAVIS/ANTHONY FINGLETON
Photography
PETER DEMING

Music
RANDY EDELMAN
99 Minutes - Certificate 12
(RANK FILM DISTRIBUTORS)

Drop Dead Fred	....	RIK MAYALL
Elizabeth	....	PHOEBE CATES
Polly	....	MARSHA MASON
Charles	....	TIM MATHESON
Janie	....	CARRIE FISHER
Murray	....	KEITH CHARLES
Young Elizabeth	....	ASHLEY PELDON
Nigel	....	DANIEL GERROLL
Mickey Bunce	....	RON ELDARD

FILM

MEETING VENUS

MARIANNE GRAY
reviews a movie about
the trials and tribulations
of staging an opera,
starring **GLENN CLOSE**
as a Swedish diva

● THE legend of "Tannhauser", a morality tale of Medieval Germany, is the Wagner opera around which this film is based. It is definitely not an 'opera movie' but it is a morality tale for the Nineties.

Using the backdrop of a frantic opera production being staged in Paris by a European opera company for satellite broadcast to the rest of the world, it is an in-depth look backstage at the ripples and crashing waves that make up a pool of people in any creative project ruled by temperaments, talents and trade unions.



The cast is a marvellous amalgam of European talents and the film is that delightful rarity, a *truly* European piece.

VERDICT

● The message of the story is great – it is just the manner it is delivered in that doesn't work. Szabo, who showed himself to be such a dazzling director with Klaus Maria Brandauer in *Mephisto* acting a similar theme – the actor who sells his soul for fame during the rise of Nazi Germany – gives us a messy film of fuzzy intellectual angles and fraught emotions.

I enjoyed it but definitely not as much as I should have. ●



Zoltan Szanto (played by Niels Arestrup) is a little-known Hungarian conductor whose big break is to lead the orchestra in Paris on this opera spectacular.

Karin Anderson (Glenn Close) is the world famous Swedish diva singing the lead. Between all the technical hitches and personal eruptions on and off the stage, their eyes meet across a crowded orchestra pit....

It isn't instant love, for the diva is someone who has lost touch with the world, having sacrificed her life for her art.

For the maestro, a married man with an insecurity problem, life in the West appears to offer more frustrations than life back home in Budapest. While longing to take up the challenge of her glances, he has to deal with battling managements, striking dancers, squabbling singers, clock-watching musicians while he watches his chance for a main slice of the action slip away in the daily drama of plotting and scheming.

It is interesting, especially now, to have the East/West thing dealt with on an emotional level, and amusing to see how rigid things in the West are.

It is also unusual and thoroughly refreshing to have what is ostensibly a love story set in the heart of the classic theatre.

Based on some of the experiences of Hungarian director Istvan Szabo when he directed "Tannhauser" for the stage in Paris, the film is shot on location in Budapest, using the city's elegant old opera house, and in Paris.

Glenn Close, whose 'singing' is dubbed by Kiri Te Kanawa, took two months of singing lessons at the Royal School of Music and learned how to lip synch, which she does perfectly.

Producer
DAVID PUTNAM
Director
ISTVAN SZABO
Screenplay
ISTVAN SZABO/MICHAEL HIRST
Photography
LAJOS KOLTAI
Music
RICHARD WAGNER
119 Minutes – Certificate 18
(WARNER BROS.)
Karin Anderson **GLENN CLOSE**
Zoltan Szanto **NIELS ARESTRUP**
Jean Gabor **MOSCU ALCALAY**
Miss Malikoff **MACHA MERIL**
Monique Angelo **JOHANNA TER STEEGE**
Maria Krawiecki **MAITE NAHYR**
Stefano Del Sarto **VICTOR POLETTI**
von Schnider **MARIAN LABUDA**
Taylor **JAY O SANDERS**
von Binder **DIETER LASER**

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